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**Counterculture, Consumerism and “The System”:
Examining Cultural Tensions and Oppositional
Ideologies in Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* (1959)**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1959) is representative of the countercultural movements that challenged the North-American society of the 1950s; in order to detect and analyse the 'rebellious' elements of the novel and in order to see how these relate to and display the cultural tensions of that time, a socio-historical contextualization of the text will be established (along with the main theoretical ideas that will serve as the basis of the analysis). Secondly, with several passages of the novel as source material, the relation between Kerouac's *Bums* and these theoretical ideas will be looked at and dealt with, as a mean to see whether the novel succeeds in its oppositional effort and in conveying the ideological tensions inherent in the 50s society or not.

1. Introduction

In *Vanity of Duluoz* (1968), Jack Kerouac recounted and covered everything in his lifespan that was prior to the publication of *On the Road* (1957), and as he recalled in that novel, the impact of World War II in North American society and in the popular psyche was easily graspable at an individual level (especially in the Post War era, the effects of which were only magnified with the Cold War paranoia that expanded throughout the United States).

Post War America was, for many, a 'better' America. A great economic growth reshaped not only the country itself or society but also the life style of most people, allowing them to live the American Dream unlike ever before. As Kenneth Paul O'Brien and Lynn Hudson Parsons state in *The Home-Front War: World War II and American Society*:

The war increased the productive power of society. Americans, young and old, male and female, of every hue and religious persuasion, were asked to put aside their traditional competition for jobs and stream into factories that now, for the first time in a generation, employed almost everyone. (O'Brien & Hudson 1995: 3)

The rise in domestic economy, along with a higher rate of birth, had "millions of southerners, black and white, [leaving] their native farm areas for urban centers, following the national highway system to the jobs in the North and West" (O'Brien & Hudson 1995: 4). As a consequence, the population increase in urban areas -which now benefited from the new economic reality of the country- led to a rise of ownership of popularised goods such as TVs, cars, new domestic appliances, and so on. Basically, Post War America saw itself changed to the core. This change meant, of course, the rise of Capitalism as the driving force behind the Post War society.

The change of ‘American’ values in favour of the new system and of the dehumanized materialist philosophy behind consumer capitalism took centre stage in the Post War artistic discourses -especially in the literary field, which saw in this context an opportunity to leave Modernism behind and break new ideological ground. As Eberhard Alsen puts it in *Romantic Postmodernism in American Fiction* (1996):

The shift from Modernism to Postmodernism in American fiction occurred in the early fifties and was due to a change in ideology from philosophical materialism to philosophical idealism on the part of major writers such as Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, and Norman Mailer. It was a shift away from Jean Paul Sartre’s belief that existence precedes essence to the opposite belief that essence precedes existence. This profound change in the outlook of major literary artists was probably, as Irving Howe suggests, a reaction against the extreme materialism of American culture in the decade after the end of World War II. (Alsen 1996:36)

However, this ideological shift -understood as the natural oppositional consequence of the rise of the new system- was not free of its own problematics. As it became more and more evident that the new literary artists were trying to reconcile their idealism with their contemporaneous society, they were only able to do such a thing at a certain extent, given the fact that their idealism was primarily based on the rejection of said society –a society which, paradoxically, had produced them and for which they produced their texts.

It is in this social rejection that many Post War writers sought their literary voice and a way to recreate a culture based on this new postmodern ideology. As argued in *The Rebel Sell*, “since the entire culture is nothing but a system of ideology, the only way to liberate oneself and others is to resist the culture in its entirety” (Heath & Potter 2005:9) and as a result, to create a new one. This is where the notion of counterculture has its roots and for what it has been understood: as an ideology that both resists and goes against the

‘main’ dominant culture in favour of the creation of a new one that is better-adjusted to Post War idealism.

Curiously enough, politics, as important as it was to the creation of this countercultural movements, was not a directly-addressed topic in countercultural texts but rather it was a ‘condition’ present in North American culture and thus, dealt with implicitly in a matter-of-fact fashion. William S. Burroughs’ *Junkie* (1953) or *Naked Lunch* (1959) can be seen as a perfect example of this, being two heavily politically charged texts that have no political aim and only treat 1950s politics as an abstract entity by which culture is conditioned.

This apoliticality may seem like a small favour to the countercultural cause but the popular appeal of this ideology was derived precisely from that, from avoiding political discourse to dwell into an idealistic one that felt closer to the roots of the cultural problems of that time:

Given the political climate of the Cold War, it is also evident that the leftist politics of the 1930’s would not attract widespread support, and, as we shall see, it is notable that the Beats and associated countercultural movements of the 1950s seemed (with a few notable exceptions) largely uninterested in major political campaigns. Instead, they tended to appeal to what they identified as ‘genuine’ American values, such as individual freedom of choice, as alternatives to a corporate capitalism that they perceived to be corrupting American ideals. (Gair 2007:26)

It is these “alternatives” that form the countercultural discourse present in many of the 50s and the 60s novels (and poems), many of which had to go through an exhaustive process of ‘editing’ in order to get published. The literary establishment of that time (understood as an abstract institution of which renowned literary critiques, authors and publishers were part of) arguably saw in censorship its best ally both to defend the dominant cultural system of which it was part and to protect it from countercultural

attacks (or subversive acts of literary practice) that challenged it. This is the reality countercultural writers had to deal with; while most chose to abide by the publication houses' 'observations' and 'edit' their texts (Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* can be seen as an example of this, being published in 1957 only after almost a decade of 'editing' and rewriting) others did not and they either remained unpublished for years or saw themselves in court defending their work in the name of freedom of expression, like the Lawrence Farlinghetti-Alan Ginsberg *Howl* obscenity case back in 1957 -which to a certain extent could be seen as the literary harbinger of many civil rights movements of the 60s.

Ginsberg's *Howl*, for its references to and depictions of sex and drug use, as well as for the lexical aspect of the text (with many swear and typically obscene words present in it, considered as coarse and vulgar) saw itself being deemed of obscenity and of no literary value, causing the arrest of its publisher and an obscenity trial in 1957, in which nine literary experts testified on the poem's behalf. Interestingly, for the poem's form and tone, the trial focused on *Howl*'s alleged "non-literarity" and can easily be seen as a formalist legal recreation of what has been one of literature's biggest debates of all time (what is literature?). Judge Clayton W. Horn's sentence appealed to the "freedom of speech and press" that are present in a nation of "free people" and stated that "these freedoms must be protected if we are to remain free, both individually and as a nation" (Horn 1957: 197). Regarding the obscenity accusation, Horn argued that "would there be any freedom of press and speech if one must reduce his vocabulary to vapid innocuous euphemism? An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words." (Horn 1957: 197) and basically ruled against the accusation stating that the poem was of "redeeming social importance" (Horn 1957: 197).

The *Howl* case clearly exemplifies the problematic dichotomy that existed (or exists) between producing countercultural texts and directing them to the same culture they went (or go) against, because since the moment a text is published, it becomes specific to its cultural environment and as a result, it is part of that culture –even if it ideologically attacks it. In a capitalist system based on consumerism such as the one Post War America adopted as the source of its economic revenue, it can be argued that despite the nature of a work, it helplessly ended (and ends) up becoming a consumer good.

Back in 1948, sociologist and legal scholar Philip Selznick postulated an organizational defensive mechanism theory that he termed as “co-optation” and which he defined as “the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-determining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence” (Selznick 1948: 34). Linking Selznick organizational ideas with 50’s America’s economic reality and consumerism, Heath and Potter redefine the theory of co-optation in *The Rebell Sell*, picturing consumer goods (like published texts) as entities inherently vulnerable to the system that tries “to assimilate resistance by appropriating its symbols, evacuating their ‘revolutionary’ content and then selling them back to the masses as commodities” (Heath & Potter 2005: 35). The implications of this for countercultural related works are of huge significance, for not only the content got softened through censorship but also it was institutionalised. There is quite a remarkable and inseparable tension between this and the main oppositional ideas behind the countercultural ideology: despite the fact that a novel is branded as ‘countercultural’ it still is a consumer good that reinforces the capitalist system it critiques and is part of the institution it fights against.

That is precisely the basic idea behind H. & Potter’s statement that “decades of countercultural rebellion have failed to change anything because the theory of society on

which the countercultural idea rests is false.” (Heath & Potter 2005:10) and that “there is no single, overarching system that integrates it all. The culture cannot be jammed because there is no such thing as ‘the culture’ or ‘the system’” (Heath & Potter 2005: 10). In other words, countercultural ideals are seemingly based on the notion that there is a culture to go against at and on the illusions that everything that is wrong with society, with its moral or its values, is part of and forms said culture; that culture, on its turn, forms society; and that culture is a single, easily noticeable –and thus, easily separable from- entity. But one of the main problems of this sort of ‘manifesto’ is that it totally neglects in its argument one of the main features of countercultural discourse: individuality.

By making individuality a recurring (and oppositional) theme in countercultural narratives whilst failing to consider it in relation to its role within ‘the culture’, the oppositional nature of countercultural ideals begins to look like idealised fiction. In the end, society is made up of thinking individuals with freedom of choice and each one informs and creates culture independently, there is no superstructure to go against at and under which individuality is suppressed but rather, individuals that structure culture according to their own political and economic ideas. The other main countercultural dilemma is that considering culture as a whole structure is basically an unsolvable paradox: one can never fully separate from and completely reject a specific culture given that one is irremediably created and shaped by it as well. It is this almost symbiotic, binary nature of the relationship between the individual and ‘the culture’ that prevents countercultural ideals from fully realizing themselves.

All of this being said and having established the countercultural ideals –and how they partially fail- the question to address now is how it all really applies to countercultural texts. How do these tensions between ‘the culture’, counterculture

ideology and consumerism relate to one another? And how the effects of these ideological discrepancies or failures reflect themselves on a properly considered countercultural text?

When talking about countercultural movements and the literary landscape of the 50s America, as previously seen in the fragment from Cristopher Gair's *The American Counterculture* (2007), the Beat Generation tends to come to the forefront. Jack Kerouac being labelled as "The King of the Beats" by the mass media of his times and him being considered the father (or one of the founding fathers) of said movement, it is only logical then, to consider one of his works to explore these issues and to try and draw from its analysis a definite conclusion. Whilst it is true that Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) still is one of his most well-known and best-selling novels and that it "is often seen as the exemplification of the 1950s counterculture" (Gair 2007:41), it is also true that it was largely set in the 40's and as Gair argues, the America that *On the Road* represents "is very different from both the dominant culture of the later 1950s and the Beatnik community that was treated near-hysterically by the mass media, and that was despised by Kerouac." (Gair 2007:41).

Due to this and to the fact that *On the Road* has been the Kerouac book of choice for numerous cultural and literary studies, Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1959) will be the source text of this paper, for its closeness to the 50s' social realities –as it was written during the period prior to and that followed the events that would be later known as The San Francisco Renaissance- and to its cultural tensions (in no other Kerouac novel he rejects American culture so head on as in this one, particularly through its immersion in Buddhist ideology).

Because of their biographical content and their overriding purpose as apologies to the beat lifestyle, *Go* and *The Dharma Bums* had a cult following but were all but boycotted by the literary establishment. Influential critics such as Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin were too shocked by Holmes' and Kerouac's advocacy of drug use and sexual

promiscuity to recognize that *Go* and *The Dharma Bums* were manifestoes of a neo-romantic counter-culture; manifestoes that were just as opposed to the official materialist culture of the United States as were Emerson's *Nature* and Thoreau's *Walden* in their time. (Alsen 1996:35)

It is precisely this aspect of *The Dharma Bums* as a neo-romantic counter-culture manifesto that makes it the most suitable countercultural novel for this analysis, also of great interest for its deliberate neglect of American literary tradition: Emerson and Thoreau's influence is clearly identifiable throughout the text, but only through the narrator's retelling of events -whilst seemingly unwilling to acknowledge them as a way to reject American culture in favour of a new orientalist (and possibly idealised) one. Following the socio-historical contextualization of the novel and having discussed the main theoretical ideas that will be applied in *The Dharma Bums*' analysis, first the major countercultural themes of the novel (as well as its tone and type of narrator) will be established and then, with a few extracts from the novel, they will be deconstructed and more deeply looked at; with this, the main aims are to find the ideological thread that fuse them together into the narrative and to try and see to what extent the previously discussed theoretical framework applies to the novel, if it succeeds in its countercultural agenda or if it does not.

2. Tone, Narrator and Major Countercultural Themes

Right from chapter one, Kerouac's *Bums* introduces itself as a spiritual journey novel. It begins in 1955 with protagonist Ray Smith¹ hopping on a freight train heading to Los Angeles. Only a few lines into it, the first bum to appear in the novel is presented, and so is Buddhist spirituality: "I reminded myself of the line in the Diamond Sutra that says, 'Practice charity without holding in mind any conceptions about charity, for charity after

¹ It being a fictionalised autobiographical text, Ray Smith acts as no other than Jack Kerouac's alter-ego. Note that this will remain as an assumed fact for the rest of the paper.

all is just a word’.” With this, the journey and the spiritual themes of the novel are established (note that the concepts of ‘charity’ and that of the Diamond Sutra will work as centre pillars of the Buddhist theme throughout the whole text). Given the autobiographical nature of the novel, its tone is pretty much dependant on the function of Ray Smith as the homodiegetic² narrator, whose voice helplessly shapes the narrative reality it presents. Thus, and despite the fact that we as readers already assumed the existence of distance between the narrative and the narrator (for the verbal tenses used and the very first sentence of the novel “one day in late September 1955”), the fragment

I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I’ve become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical. Because now I am grown so old and neutral... but then I really believed in the reality of charity and kindness and humility and zeal and neutral tranquillity and wisdom and ecstasy [...]. (Kerouac 1959: 8)

serves the dual function of setting up the tone of the novel whilst boldly establishing the distance between Ray Smith ‘the narrator’ and Ray Smith ‘the character’. The contrast between the past’s beliefs and the present’s cynicism points at one of the novel’s main thematic conflicts, one that keeps reappearing throughout the narrative and that informs and is part of Ray’s character: the difficulty of reconciling spiritual beliefs with a desolated reality³.

Considering the ending lines of Kerouac’s 1960 novel *Tristessa* “I’ll write long sad tales about the people in the legend of my life”, it can easily be argued that many of Jack Kerouac’s novels (despite their autobiographical nature and homodiegetic narrators)

² The type of narrator who “tells his own story” (Genette 1988: 84).

³ Theme that links *The Dharma Bums* (1959) with its ‘follow-up’, adequately titled *Desolation Angels* (1966).

have this one character that works at the centre of it as if being the true protagonist of the narrative. If in *On the Road* (1957) Kerouac's alter-ego Sal Paradise is shadowed by Dean Moriarty; if in *The Subterraneans* (1958) that character is Mardou and if in *Tristessa* (1960) it is Tristessa herself the one that takes centre stage, in *The Dharma Bums* this character is Japhy Ryder –whom is no other than poet Gary Snyder's alter ego.

With the appearance of Japhy at the beginning of chapter two, the economic and sociocultural underlying subtexts of the novel start working as the countercultural elements representative of the ideological dilemma present in the 50's North American society.

Japhy Ryder was a kid from eastern Oregon brought up in a log cabin deep in the woods with his father and mother and sister, from the beginning a woods boy, an axman, farmer, interested in animals and Indian lore so that when he finally got to college by hook or crook he was already well equipped for his early studies in anthropology and later in Indian myth and in the actual texts of Indian mythology. Finally he learned Chinese and Japanese and became an Oriental scholar [...] At the same time, being a Northwest boy with idealistic tendencies, he got interested in oldfashioned I.W.W. anarchism and learned to play the guitar and sing old worker songs to go with his Indian songs and general folksong interests. (pg. 12)

These are the first facts about Japhy that we are told of; we are not informed of his physical appearance nor how the narrator met him, but of his psychological mind frame, his sociocultural background and of his ideology –as if the narrator is basically stressing these facts for their importance within the narrative he is telling. Thus, three aspects of Japhy's description need to be addressed, as they will be the recurring countercultural themes of the novel: nature, orientalism and anarchism. The importance or role of nature here is both to point at a deep American background and to contrast Japhy's early days 'deep in the woods' (the past) with him now living in San Francisco, which as a result, serves to explore the dilemma between the past's idealism (deep connection with nature) and the present's materialism (disconnecting from nature in

favour of new urban areas). In this fragment and in the novel as a whole, orientalism and anarchism can be seen as interrelated elements: Japhy's ideology does not only reject the political system of his time but also its religious and ideological one, as if breaking totally away from his Americanness. Curiously enough, the reject of 'Americanness' is not only pointed at subtly or indirectly; whilst this indirectness would be true for the first pages of the novel, it comes a point in which Japhy himself addresses this issue in a very bold and specific manner when saying:

You know when I was a little kid in Oregon I didn't feel that I was an American at all, with all that suburban ideal and sex repression and general dreary newspaper censorship of all our real human values but and when I discovered Buddhism and all I suddenly felt that I had lived in a previous lifetime innumerable ages ago and now because of faults and sins in that lifetime I was being degraded to a more grievous domain of existence and my karma was to be born in America where nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom. That's why I was always sympathetic to freedom movements too. Like anarchism in the Northwest, the old time heroes of Everett Massacre and all... (pg.29)

This is one of the most enlightening passages concerning Japhy's character and identity; what was previously only assumed is now specifically admitted and appropriated by Japhy himself and what was before an implicit issue is now made an explicit one. With Americanness being thought of and reduced to a "degraded" state of living, and with America being described as a sort of real-life purgatory in which "nobody has any fun or believes in anything, especially freedom" –a place in which one only lives to atone his previous life's sins-, Japhy embraces and delights on an Americanness reject. The oppositional nature of *The Dharma Bums* and its countercultural genetic material are basically labelled under Japhy's character and his ideological fight against North-America's cultural system⁴.

⁴ That is, unlike Heath & Potter, if we believe in the existence of such a system.

3. Idealism, Materialism and Ideological Discrepancies

Japhy's anarchistic ideas "about how Americans don't know how to live, with lines about commuters being trapped in living rooms that come from poor trees felled by chainsaws (showing here, also, his background as a logger up north)"(p.16) reflect his already established reject of North-American culture and way of life and, due to his background, nature is connected with said reject, making visible the clash between society's appreciation of nature in the past and the present's materialist 'recklessness'. Moreover, this rejection is not dealt with only ideologically but also physically, only to confirm the boldness of his beliefs.

Japhy lived in his own shack which was infinitely smaller than ours, about twelve by twelve, with nothing in it but typical Japhy appurtenances that showed his belief in the simple monastic life – no chairs at all, not even one sentimental rocking chair, but just straw mats. In the corner was his famous rucksack with cleaned-up pots and pans all fitting into one another in a compact unit and all tied up and put away inside a knotted-up blue bandana. Then his Japanese wooden pata shoes, which he never used, and a pair of black inside-pata socks to pad around softly in over his pretty straw mats [...] In fact if a thief should have broken in there the only things of real value were the books. Japhy's clothes were all Old hand-me-downs bought secondhand with a bemused and happy expression in Goodwill and Salvation Army stores. (pg. 18)

This passage –along with him having lived in a small cabin in the woods, and him now living in a self-made cabin in San Francisco- clearly evokes and feeds on Thoreau's *Walden*, one of the most recognizable oppositional texts ever written. The emphasis on showing how humble and simple Japhy's lifestyle is (with almost no commodities) on highlighting the non-necessity of things –apart from helping to evoke the "simplicity, simplicity" line-, works to construct an anticapitalistic discourse (and critique) that will remain heavily present throughout the rest of the novel. Given all of this, it can be stated that Japhy Ryder *is* the embodiment of what it is to go against one's own culture and

ideology and that he, as a character, serves to represent countercultural ideals and to contrast them with society's general ideology –as well as with other characters', especially with Ray's.

Interestingly, the description of Ray Smith's place could not be any more different than that of Japhy's; In chapter 3, we are told of Ray living with Alvah Goldbook –Allen Ginsberg's alter-ego- in a fully equipped house with a yard, "a perfect little kitchen with a gas stove", "a perfect little bathroom with a tub and hot water, and one main room, covered with pillows and floor mats of straw and mattresses to sleep on [...] and a good three-speed phonograph"(pg. 18). The contrast between Japhy and Ray's physical worlds, whilst seemingly just being a different way of understanding the concept of 'lifestyle', points at a very deep ideological discrepancy between the two characters; a discrepancy that was wilfully –and perhaps, unconsciously- addressed by the narrator in page 17, when noting that he "had a lot more to learn, too. Especially about how to handle girls –Japhy's incomparable Zen Lunatic way". The suggestion that his interest in learning more about Japhy's religious ways and beliefs (considering them equal to his, only a bit more evolved) is "especially" focused on how to "handle girls", already establishes Ray as a less genuine oppositional idealist and highlights the materialist aspect of his character.

The clash between Japhy's idealism and Ray's materialism will remain at the centre of the conflicts these two characters have with one another, possibly addressing to a theoretical failure on the part of Ray's ideals as being not fully countercultural ones. Interestingly, throughout all the novel, Ray sees Japhy as a role model, always comparing him with his own ways.

This poor kid ten years younger than I am is making me look like a fool forgetting all the ideals and joys I knew before, in my recent years of drinking and disappointment, what does he care if he hasn't got any money: he doesn't need any money, all he needs is his rucksack with those little plastic bags of dried food and a good pair of shoes and off

he goes and enjoys the privileges of a millionaire in surroundings like this. And what gouty millionaire could get up this rock anyhow? (p. 66)

By looking up to Japhy, Ray automatically makes himself “look like a fool”. Ray’s self-awareness and self-consciousness allows the foolish “ideals and joys” he knew before to evolve under the full realization of Japhy’s ideology. It is almost as if the purpose of them meeting is just so that Ray can be able to leave behind his half-materialist thinking and embrace a full reject of North-American culture, whilst learning how to build his own with Japhy, as a sort of oppositional and romantic *bildungsroman*. In this sense, Ray’s character and *The Dharam Bums* seem less of a countercultural ideological failure and more of a ‘declaration’ of intentions –or, a countercultural guide to leave behind philosophical materialism. The reduction of millionaires as objects of “gouty” jokes is nothing more than Ray trying to reduce economic power to uselessness, what is the point on being a millionaire if they can not “get up this rock anyhow?”

The reduction and critique of economic power transcends the pragmatic dimension of the concept “money” and clearly attacks its social construct. When Japhy is arguing in favour of ‘charity’ and of giving presents to others, the narrator observes that “The way he did it was charming; there was nothing glittery and Christmassy about it, but almost sad, and sometimes his gifts were old beat-up things but they had the charm of usefulness [...]” (p. 66) The first thing to note here is that, as previously mentioned, in both Japhy’s and Ray’s mind-sets, the notions of ‘charity’ and of ‘giving’ are related to their Buddhist ideology and as a result, the economic critique their discourse builds extends also to Catholicism and to the West’s dominant religious institution; “Christmassy” is used as a negative term to devaluate both presents and the act of ‘giving’, and linking it with the fact that Japhy’s presents “were old beat-up things” with the charm of usefulness, the Capitalist dimension of modern catholic religion is directly

addressed to and critiqued. Due to his orientalist beliefs, Japhy's anarchism is made visible through his own construction of Capitalist social conventions.

As a result, if we consider economic power as the embodiment of materialist thinking, it is much easier to realize how Ray and Japhy's ideological discrepancies work as a proof of the first's countercultural failure and of the latter's genuine ideals. In chapter six, after they both have decided to go climb the Matterhorn as a spiritual enterprise, they stop at a bar and the first ideological clash between the two is played out;

Now at the bar, where we'd stopped at my insistence ('In this kinda cold northern up-mountain country ain't nothing better for a man's soul at midnight but a good warm glass of warmin red port heavy as the syrups of Sir Arthur')

'Okay, Smith,' said Japhy, 'but seems to me we shouldn't drink on a hiking trip.'

'Ah who gives a damn?'

'Okay, but look at all the money we saved by buying cheap dried foods for this weekend and all you're gonna do is drink it right down.' (p.40)

One's unwillingness to spend much money on ephemeral goods is the other's weak spot, especially when those goods are alcohol. Japhy tries to save money and not spend it, aware of the capitalist reality of the western world –and very much so, as he previously explained his ideological connection with I.W.W. and worker movements- and Ray, possibly with Kerouac's own alcoholism, falls victim of his "illness" and is willing to lose economic power (or to hand it to the system) in exchange for a drink, distancing himself from the spiritual nature of the trip in favour of reinforcing society's materialism.

The seeds planted with this seemingly irrelevant dispute turn out to grow stronger as the narrative unfolds; as both characters realize each other's ideas, they are obliged to directly deal with their ideological differences –and face them. By chapter twelve, they

are returning from their hiking trip and decide to stop at a restaurant, recreating in a bigger scale the first argument they had when stopping at the bar.

This little tough guy who wasn't afraid of anything and could ramble around mountains for weeks alone and run down mountains, was afraid of going into a restaurant because the people in it were too well dressed. [...] But Japhy thought the place I chose looked too bourgeois and insisted on going to a more workingman-looking restaurant across the highway. [...] I got mad and said 'let's go [back] to that other place. What you afraid of, Japhy, what's the difference? [...] In fact we got a little miffed at each other and I felt bad. [...] Japhy, I found, was also afraid of spending ten cents more for a good dinner. I went to the bar and bought a glass of port and brought it to our stool seats at the counter (Japhy: 'You sure you can do that?') and I kidded Japhy awhile. He felt better now. 'That's what's the trouble with you Japhy, you're just an old anarchist scared of society. What difference does it make? Comparisons are odious.' (p.79)

Just like their previous dispute, this one also centres on money. However, Japhy's self-consciousness and idealistic identity is laid out stronger this time around, not only by the narrator "he was also afraid of spending ten more cents for a good dinner" but also by Japhy himself "you sure you can do that?", directly addressing to Ray's "consumerist" character or just to their ideological discrepancies. Whereas one longs for some sort of secluded life that clearly differentiates himself from the rest of society in all terms, the other seems to just be toying with that idea as long as it serves him to understand his doubts, himself or life –if not to have some more things to write about. They're ideologically distinct in the sense of their compromise towards their shared beliefs. This can also be seen in a previous passage, when climbing down Matterhorn Ray says "What's the sense of killing yourself like this, you call this fun? Phooey.' (Your ideas are a crock, I added to myself)" as if all this is just an experiment of living. Ray's inherent opinion of Japhy's strong beliefs –that they are "a crock"- is what inevitably marks the half-falsehood of his ideals and what differentiates him from Japhy; They both reject the society and culture they belong to, but Japhy perhaps does so more convincingly and to a greater extent than Ray –who seems to be still trying to figure out how to apply his

ideological reject whilst keeping all he likes about said society (the bars, the alcohol, the nightlife -the materialism).

Well Smith, it just looked to me like this place was full of old rich farts and the prices would be too high, I admit it, I'm scared of all this American wealth, I'm just an old Bhikku and I got nothing to do with all this high standard of living, goddammit, I've been a poor guy all my life and I can't get used to some things. (p. 79)

Clearly Japhy not only longs for differentiating himself from the rest of American society but also identifies himself as a "bhikku" and not as an American (as if he were a living chinese Thoreau living in the simplicity of things), not being ready for the current "American wealth" that the new Post-War system has brought to the country. Ray's weaker commitment (or will) to legitimize his ideals through all of his actions, places him in a position of half-rejection, making the character fail at being a fully functional countercultural idealist.

As thinkers, mankind have ever been divided in two sects: materialists and idealists; the first class founding on experience, the second on consciousness; the first class beginning to think from the data of the senses, the second class perceive that the senses are not final, and say, the senses give as representations of things, but what are things themselves, they cannot tell. (Emerson 1842: 101)

The two-sects divide Emerson pointed out in his 1842 lecture *The Transcendentalist* is precisely what Ray (the 'materialist') and Japhy (the 'idealist') majorly display through their conflicts and character differences. However, if that was really so, it would mean that Ray is the embodiment of materialist thinking and that he, as a character, ultimately fails at being an oppositional character and in his journey to become a new countercultural 'self-made man'. What redeems him (and his quest) of this half-failure is precisely his similarities with Japhy and most notably, literary tradition; If Thoreau's previous references are thought of not as a coincidence –which is hardly ever the case- then, Emerson's are not either:

You'll be sorry some day. Why don't you ever understand what I'm trying to tell you: it's with your six senses that you're fooled into believing not only that you have six senses, but that you contact an actual outside world with them. [...] There is no me, no airplane, no Princess, no nothing, you for krissakes do you want to go on being fooled every damn minute of your life? (p.30)

For a character like Ray -who keeps on portraying materialist thinking throughout many parts of the novel- to argue building on Emerson's notion of idealist thinking, does nothing but prevent him from actually being representative of materialism. This points at an appropriation of ideas and a subsequent rework on them (from the part of the author), which is what makes the text interesting for an analysis based on cultural and ideological tensions.

4. Sexual Politics

Having dealt with the representation of the 50's North-America's economic reality in *The Dharma Bums* in terms of how this manifests the cultural and individual tensions between the 'mainstream' system and the countercultural ideology, it is time to briefly look at another aspect of the 50's society that was quite controversial at the time (and for which many Beat texts got censored and openly criticised by the 'mainstream' culture). The way sexual politics are represented in *The Dharma Bums* plays a very important role in establishing the oppositional nature of the overall text *and* of the characters, whilst also shedding some light to what perhaps was a very common social dilemma. With Ray's beliefs being heavily rooted in Catholicism (despite him embracing Buddhist ideology), the conflict between his notion of 'sex' –backed-up by that time's religious and social conventions- and that of Japhy's comes to the forefront in Chapter four. When Ray discovers that in spite of the fact that Japhy is supposedly intending to live a seemingly 'monastic' and secluded life, he is also having sex, he reflects on his own attitude towards the subject:

I'd also gone through an entire year of celibacy based on my feeling that lust was the direct cause of birth which was the direct cause of suffering and death [...] And the absence of active lust in me had also given me a new peaceful life that I was enjoying a great deal. (p.27)

The reflection of sex as the source of death is not particularly new to this novel: it had already been greatly explored in Kerouac's previous narrative *The Subterraneans* (1958), and it was clearly constructed upon Catholic ideals and thinking, pretty much evoking the traditional conception of sex as being sinful and regretful –mirroring Dedalus' religiously-fuelled 'sex-dread' in James Joyce⁵'s *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*.

Ray rejects sex in a way pretty much like the North American "restrictive morality of the 50's" (Bowman 2005: 297) told its people to with its "disintegrating sexual norms" (Bowman 2005: 297). Ray's attitude towards sex contrasts with Japhy's own thinking regarding the subject: when he tells Ray "Smith, I distrust any kind of Buddhism or any kinda philosophy or social system that puts down sex." (p.28) the countercultural rebel Japhy represents puts an idealistic bullet into Ray's conventional thinking. The key countercultural element here is distrusting "any kind of Buddhism" or "social system that puts down sex"; Japhy is not rejecting his Americannes nor his society to embrace a fully Buddhist identity, but by remarking the he distrusts Buddhism if it puts down sex, he is stating that basically no organizational system or convention will prevent him from acting and living the way he wants to. This implies that he –and countercultural idealism- is not about to change one culture for another but that he intends to and purposely acts on creating his own⁶. Again, Ray seems to fall short on realizing this on his own and needs Japhy's influence to help him strengthen his ideas in order to let his rebellious-self evolve.

⁵ Kerouac considered James Joyce as one of his literary referents, so the fact that Joyce's novels often appear in Kerouac's fiction –whether mentioned or mirrored- needs to be established.

⁶ Note that Heath & Potter ideas regarding countercultural ideas are a constant trait of Japhy's carácter.

It keeps getting clearer that whereas Japhy has a well-constructed and strong ideology of his own, Ray just doesn't have a clue of what to think anymore, so his ideas are not as steady and marked as Japhy's, which links to the previous passages connotations about their differences in character and their take on the mainstream system. More importantly perhaps, is the fact that after the exchange of their views on sex, Japhy easily convinces Ray to abandon his celibacy and his beliefs about lust and do "yab-yum" (a Tibetan sex practice based on spirituality) with him, Princess and Alvah. Under this new ideological light, Ray agrees to participate in the orgy (wearing some of his clothes) as a way of rejecting their social system in favour of another one in which that act is a spiritual one and is not condemned.

5. Nature

Back at the beginning of the countercultural analysis of the text, nature, orientalism and anarchism were pointed out as the three major oppositional elements of the novel and, whereas anarchism has been implicitly and explicitly discussed with several fragments dealing with the character of Japhy, the theme of nature has only been briefly discussed in relation to the Thoreauian references. Moreover, given Eberhard Alsen's definition of *The Dharma Bums* as a "neo-romantic countercultural manifesto", it is only appropriate to provide a deeper analysis of the role nature has in the novel. Its importance in relation to the whole text begins to be prominently found from chapter six onwards, from the moment they go climb the Matterhorn mountain.

Romantic beliefs state that there is a spiritual relation between nature and God, and that this relation is to be found everywhere when one is surrounded by wilderness. In chapter nine, when "the mountains were getting that pink tinge, I mean the rocks, they were just solid rocks covered with the atoms of dust accumulated there since beginningless time." (p.58) the implications of nature as a whole-entity, as an entity which

pretty much like God has always witnessed everything and has appropriated everything, is laid out as a subtextual constant for the rest of the characters' hiking trip; "the atoms of dust", a symbol of natural appropriation here, pointing at everything throughout the world's existence that has become one with nature. As Emerson stated in his 1849 essay *Nature*, when surrounded by nature and wilderness "I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (p.3). In nature, one *becomes* a "transparent eye-ball" that more than reflecting what is, absorbs it and fuses with it, becoming a "particle of God". This spiritual union between nature, the self and God (or spiritual beliefs), is deeply explored during Ray's and Japhy's trip to Matterhorn (and also during Ray's last –in the novel- journey in solitude to Desolation Peak), as one of them points out:

Yeah man, you know to me a mountain is a Buddha. Think of the patience, hundreds of thousands of years just sitting there bein perfectly silent and like praying for all living creatures in that silence and just waitin for us to stop all our frettin and foolin. (p.58)

They explicitly connect their natural environment with Buddha, by sort of appropriating western ideas –such as Emerson's- and orientalising them, showing once again their reject to western culture. But the mountains (nature) are not only identified with a deity but also *act* as one, "praying for all living creatures" and "waitin for us to stop all our frettin and foolin", which presumably points to the denaturalised civilisation which both characters have left behind. By having nature act as a conscious being praying for humanity, the connection of the natural with the spiritual is strongly established, and they, as individuals, become one with it: with Ray "true to what Japhy had predicted [...] had absolutely not a jot of appetite for alcohol, [he] had forgotten all about it" (p.63), forgetting civilisation's materialism and embracing a deeper connection with nature. When looking at the mountains, Japhy states "I like the real thing meself"(p.46) as if

saying that civilisation and culture and society –all of which is now behind them- are not real, that they are an illusion and the only real thing in the world is nature, for its power to transcend physical and mundane dimensions of being. He said so “looking seriously at the mountains and in that far-off look in his eyes, that secret self-high, I saw he was back home again” (p.46), as if his ‘real’ life happens when he is surrounded by nature, as if when he joins society he just plays a part in a delusional play.

Civilisation’s disconnection from nature and from its ‘real’ state of being is also a quite prevalent notion in the text, and whilst during the Matterhorn trip this disconnect is treated implicitly by a connoted contrast between what the protagonist or protagonists are experiencing now (in nature) and what they experienced before (in civilisation), as seen in the previous passage, in chapter six –coincidentally the chapter that marks the start of the ‘nature’ theme- this disconnection is heavily addressed by Japhy:

‘All these people’, said Japhy, ‘they all got white-tiled toilets and take big dirty craps like bears in the mountains, but it’s all washed away to convenient supervised sewers and nobody thinks of crap any more or realizes that their origin is shit and civet and scum of the sea. They spend all day washing their hands with creamy soaps they secretly wanta eat in the bathroom.’ (p.35)

What comes out of this comparison relating it to what was previously said about the ‘real thing’, is an interesting parallel between the external world (made up of society and a denaturalised civilisation) and the inner world (nature and spirituality), showing the rejection of the external reality of things in favour of the inner one. This parallel is played out greatly during the Matterhorn trip. As they climbed, and “the lake began to appear below” them:

‘oh this is like an early morning in China and I’m five years old in beginningless time!’ [...] ‘Look over there,’ sang Japhy, ‘yellow aspens. Just put me in the mind of a Haiku... “talking about the literary life – the yellow aspens.”’ Walking in this country you could only understand the perfect gems of haikus the Oriental poets had written,

never getting drunk in the mountains or anything but just going along as fresh as children writing down what they saw without literary devices or fanciness of expression. We made up haikus as we climbed, winding up and up now on the slopes of brush. (p.52)

Despite having never been in China, Ray and Japhy relate the American landscape with it, which is an indication of the connection between nature and their spiritual inner world, and their rejection of the external reality (America itself). Also, it needs to be addressed that in this context nature doesn't recall American literary tradition but Oriental, with the haikus being the nexus between this very North-American landscape ("And here's some California red poppy over there. The whole meadow is just powdered with color! Up there by the way is a genuine California white pine, you never see them much any more" p.52) and the Chinese literary tradition. No western writers come up in the narrative as the personification of nature as a universal theme in literature. Rather, Kerouac focuses on oriental spiritualism to touch upon this theme, neglecting his culture's own literary tradition whilst paradoxically recreating it himself through his narrator. By criticising western "literary devices or fanciness of expression" whilst heavily using them during the whole narrative, and with Kerouac's writing style being so characterised by them, one can't help but ask if this is a technique to include himself into American literary tradition as an ironical self-critique, or if this actually shows a deeper countercultural dilemma: the impossibility of a full separation from and full reject of one's own culture.

With the main countercultural theoretical failure being the consideration of "the culture" or "the system" as one single superstructure instead of the result of a plurified organizational relationship between several independent structures, countercultural ideology limits its success on a whole reject of "the system", bounding itself to an inevitable failure.

and over the stream was a perfect bridge formed by a fallen snag, we got on it and lay belly-down and dunked our heads down, hair wet, and drank deep as the water splashed in our faces, like sticking your head by the jet of a dam. I lay there a good long minute enjoying the sudden coolness. 'This is like an advertisement for Rainier Ale!' yelled Japhy. (p.53)

From the moment they abandon their idealistic views on the American landscape that's become so Chinese at heart, and are fully aware of its true and natural national identity (from the moment they are fully conscious of this landscape being so particularly Californian), no more haiku talk but Rainier Ale (beer) ads. This points at an unconscious reality in which not even Japhy is able to fully separate nature from the external world it creates, connecting it directly with civilisation, capitalism and consumerism. Once nature has been identified as American they no longer connect it to Oriental tradition as a means to spiritually and ideologically reject their own but they connect it to American beer advertisements and national identity, heavily linking it to capitalism. The fact that it is Japhy (whom up until now has been seen as the embodiment of countercultural ideas and of American reject) the one to relate nature with American consumerist culture makes quite a bold argument in favour of the impossibility of fully separating oneself from the culture that has created him. This, as a result, points at the main theoretical dilemma behind countercultural ideology: had "the system" been a single, easily identifiable unit, a full separation from it would be nothing but possible, but its true organizational nature creates so many roots and implications in the individual subconscious that such a thing as a total reject seems impossible, even for Japhy himself.

Perhaps as a result of this inherent impossibility, Japhy physically leaves America for good by the end of the novel, going to Japan to learn and practice more of his spirituality and orientalist ideology, as a ultimate showing of American reject and as the only way he can actually try to not be part of a culture he so heavily despises. Ray, on the

other hand, has appropriated most of Japhy's ideas and nurtured his own thanks to it. Paralleling his and Japhy's trip to Matterhorn, in the last chapters of the novel he sets out to Desolation Peak to live in solitude for a while, in a sort of secluded monastic life similar to that of Tibetan priests and to that pointed at by both Emerson and Thoreau.

It was Japhy who had advised me to come here and now though he was seven thousand miles away in Japan answering the meditation bell [...] he seemed to be standing on Desolation Peak by the gnarled old rocky trees certifying everything and justifying all that was here. 'Japhy', I said out loud, 'I don't know when we'll meet again or what'll happen in the future, but Desolation, Desolation, I owe so much to Desolation, thank you forever for guiding me to the place I learned all. Now comes the sadness of coming back to cities and I've grown two months older and there's all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upsidedown in the void God bless them, but Japhy you and me forever we know, O ever youthful, O ever weeping.' (p.204)

In this extract from the closing lines of the novel, Ray's ideas come out stronger than in any previous passage, surprisingly referring to all he previously loved about civilisation and society (the bars, the burlesque, the love, the materialism that interfered so much between his and Japhy's ideas at the beginning) as being "upsidedown in the void", expressing the 'non-reality' he feels these elements have now in contrast with nature and his reinforced ideas. If *The Dharma Bums* is to be considered as a neo-romantic and countercultural *bildungsroman*, by the end, Ray actually thrives on coming out of it as a new man, leaving his older self behind as he "turned and went on down the trail back to this world" (p.204)

6. Conclusion

Perhaps Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* falls victim to H. & Potter's observations regarding the problematics of countercultural ideas in relation to the system, but as a whole, due to its representation of the cultural (materialist-ideologist) tensions present at that time, to its treatment of countercultural ideology as a set of interrelated elements

(present in almost every page of the narrative) and to the success of both Ray's and Japhy's *bildungsroman* journey -of an oppositional nature in regards of freeing themselves from the system-, it can be argued that the novel also succeeds on being a countercultural product (materialist pun intended), despite the inevitable showcases of countercultural theoretical failure.

This countercultural success is what made possible “the ways in which the Beatnik could be associated in the public mind not only with antisocial behaviour but with things subversive and anti-American” (Gair 2007: 40), which likely *is* the novel's actual success; By showing a growing “dissatisfaction within the 1950s white America that would act as a precursor to what Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums* correctly prophesises as a forthcoming ‘rucksack revolution’ a decade later” (Gair 2007:39), Kerouac indirectly questions an America “increasingly shaped by what Eisenhower would later call the military-industrial complex” (Gair 2007: 39). Showing the real-life impact Kerouac's novels had, “Barry Gifford points out that the success of *On the Road* and the subsequent arrest of Neal Cassady [as told in Kerouac's 1962 novel *Big Sur*] were not coincidental”, highlighting precisely how much of a threat to ‘the system’ (the repressive militarised and industrialised society of the 50s) countercultural thinking was at that time; and perhaps, this is exactly what redeems the theoretical wrongs of countercultural ideology in literary texts and in *The Dharma Bums*, the possibility of actually being genuine cultural opposition with real-life implications.

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